

Protection

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Summary: Stoick felt an overwhelming need to protect his calamity-prone son. But he knew he couldn't be there for Hiccup all the time. His solution made a lot of people happy, but no one ever knew his real motive.

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"The truth is, ye won't always be around to protect 'im."

The truth of Gobber's words had hit Stoick hard that morning, on two levels. He realized that he, indeed, couldn't always be in a position to protect his son. He had the responsibility for an entire village on his shoulders, and no matter how broad and strong those shoulders might be, it was still a heavy burden. It left little time or energy for family concerns. He couldn't be there for his son the way Val had been.

But he took something else away from that conversation as well. It was the first time anyone had put his unconscious thoughts into words. _Hiccup needed to be protected._

Some buildings attracted lightning, some sheep attracted predators, and Hiccup attracted disaster. Even when he was trying his best to behave, things tended to go amiss when he was around. When he was free to be himself, the only questions were "What's going to go wrong?" and "How much damage will he do this time?" Stoick hated to think how many times he'd saved his son's life, or how often he'd turned a potentially serious injury into a minor accident. If he hadn't been there in time...

The chief knew he wouldn't live forever; no one does. Warriors who put themselves in the front lines in the war against dragons had a shorter life span than most. If something happened to him in the next

dragon raid, what would happen to Hiccup? Who would look after him? Who would protect him?

Gobber wanted Hiccup to receive dragon training so he could protect himself. That seemed an unlikely outcome. One of the main reasons Stoick agreed to the training was that he knew he wouldn't be around to help his son while he was sailing for Helheim's Gate. If Hiccup was enrolled in dragon training, he would be under Gobber's care. That would keep him fairly safe, even if it did bring him face to face with dragons.

When he got back from his failed voyage, Gobber brought him up to speed. Hiccup had, indeed, almost gotten killed in his first attempt at dragon training; the smith had saved his life at the last moment. He didn't do much better on his second outing â€" it was the Hofferson girl who saved him that time. But after that, he somehow found a skill with dragons that no one ever could have suspected. He outdid all his peers and became the town's number-one dragon fighting candidate.

Still, when Stoick had the chance to give his son a gift, he chose a helmet. "To keep you safe in the ring." Something to protect him.

The chief finally had the pleasure of seeing his son in action in the final training battle. He almost had to fight two battles; no sooner was the Gronckle knocked out than the Hofferson girl threw a dragon-like tantrum of her own. But the results were undeniable. Had Hiccup finally turned the corner?

Then came that awful day when he faced the Monstrous Nightmare in the ring, cast his weapons aside, and suddenly became the dragon's prey. There was no one to help him (except that Hofferson girl again; she had real warrior potential), and he had to try and rescue Hiccup again. This time, he got there too late to make any difference. Still, his son got the protection he needed â€" not from his father, or from his friends, or from any other warrior in the village, but from a Night Fury! That was one of the most intolerable parts of the entire episode. Stoick had been too slow to save his son, who now owed his life to a dragon.

Fast-forward to the great battle on the island with the dragons' nest. (Please fast-forward past that awful confrontation in the Mead Hall; Stoick wished with all his heart that that episode had never happened.) His army was being routed by a huge, unstoppable dragon; there was no hope for any of them to survive. Literally out of the blue, Hiccup arrived with his friends, riding the training dragons. The others distracted the monster while Hiccup tried to rescue his pet dragon from a burning ship.

Stoick saw him trying, foresaw trouble, and ran in that direction. He was just in time (again!) to pull his son out of the frigid waters before he drowned. Why he dove in again to save the dragon, he couldn't say. It seemed necessary somehow. Once the deed was done, he realized that Hiccup meant to fly into single combat against the rampaging giant. He also realized that his accident-prone son and his evil-looking winged steed were his tribe's only hope.

Even then, he tried to protect Hiccup. Would he have told any other warrior that fighting to save the tribe was optional? Yet those were

his words. "You don't have to go up there."

Hiccup had thrown his own words back at him. "We're Vikings, Dad. It's an occupational hazard." Stoick had taken the title of Viking away from him in the Mead Hall, and Hiccup had reclaimed it. Very well; the chief would restore the other title he'd taken as well. "I'm proud to call you my son." Hiccup had a battle to fight; let him go into it with no cloud of disapproval hanging over his head.

Hiccup won that battle, but Stoick could not protect him from the consequences. Incredibly, the dragon did protect him, but even that protection only went so far. The shattered leg, the weeks of unconsciousness, the fever and fear of death... neither Stoick nor the dragon could protect him from any of those things.

Stoick had reached the limit of what he could do to keep Hiccup safe. It was time for him to arrange for something more.

"Stoick, ye're crazy," was Gobber's response. "Ye're talkin' about a full-time bodyguard for yer son."

"I can't think of any other way," the chief rumbled.

"For one thing, ye won't find any volunteers for that kind o' work," the smith said. "An' for another thing, it would be totally humiliatin' for the boy. Ye'd be tellin' the whole village that he can't stand on his own two feet! Well, his own one foot, an' the one I made for him. Well, ye know what I mean."

"Gobber, you know what he's like!" Stoick answered. "I've got to do _something_ to keep him safe when I'm not around!"

"Assignin' a warrior to follow yer son around all day is not the answer," Gobber said firmly. "Don't ye think the dragon is protection enough for 'im?"

"I can't deny, that creature does look out for him," Stoick replied. "But I still don't trust dragons, not that far. I want my son watched by a person who knows what Hiccup is like."

"The ones who know 'im the best are the ones who want to stay a safe distance from 'im. Think o' somethin' else, Stoick."

So Stoick walked down to the cliffs and sat down, looking out at the sea. He knew no one would bother him if he kept stroking his beard and looking thoughtful. He considered every angle he could think of. How could he arrange for his son to be guarded without embarrassing him?

A minor commotion overhead caught his attention. The teens who rode dragons were playing some kind of game in the sky, shouting and whooping. If they could just be quiet for a few more minutes, maybe he'd think of something. If anything, they got even noisier. He eventually gave up and went home. As he lay awake in bed that night, he was still trying to think of some way to accomplish his goal.

What about those teens?

They always stayed together. If one of them was watching out for Hiccup, his son would never suspect it. Perhaps he could make a deal with one of them to be Hiccup's guard? He could make a quiet payment to the family now and then, in exchange for services rendered, and no one would ever be the wiser.

But whom to choose?

The Thorston twins? No, they were constantly fighting each other. He couldn't count on them to keep their eyes on his son.

The Ingerman boy? He seemed to like Hiccup, but his battle skills were untested, and his dragon skills left much to be desired. Maybe, but maybe not.

Spitelout's boy? He had the skills and the courage. But Stoick had heard some unpleasant rumors about how the boy had treated Hiccup in the past. That would be like putting the fox in charge of the hen house.

The Hofferson girl? She had all the Viking virtues. She never went anywhere without her axe and her armor, so she'd always be ready to look out for Hiccup. She liked his son, too; that kissing incident in front of his house had set tongues a-wagging all over town for a week. But would she be willing to serve as a guard for a boy? If anyone found out, Hiccup's humiliation would be even greater than if he had a male guardian.

Perhaps he could arrange things so she would look after him informally, without being paid? Then there could never be any shame for Hiccup. No; he couldn't imagine how he might arrange that.

In any event, it was impossible. Hiccup would have his own house some day, and a girl couldn't spend time with him there. It wouldn't be proper; it was against all the social rules. They couldn't spend that kind of time together unless they were m  

Stoick sat bolt-upright in bed. He let himself smile. The only reason a light bulb didn't go on above his head, was that light bulbs hadn't been invented yet. When he lay down a minute later, he dozed off quickly, and slept the peaceful sleep of a man whose most vexing problem has been solved.

The Hofferson family was neither famous nor prosperous. The idea of an alliance with the chief's family was so far out of their reach, they'd never even considered the possibility, until the chief brought it up when he visited them that morning. There was no question that they would agree in principle, and when they met again with witnesses the next day to work out the arrangements, they didn't try to drive too hard a bargain. They didn't need to; as the town's chief, Stoick could afford to be generous. Bride-price, dowry, and morning-gift were all agreed on, and the chief clasped hands with Astrid's father. It was done. Their children were engaged.

Stoick made the announcement at the evening meal. There was much applause and many good wishes from everyone in town, but the chief's main concern was how his son and his future daughter-in-law took the news.

The initial reaction was "not well." Hiccup looked stunned, then

vaguely nauseous, then terrified as he took his first look at his new fiancée. She looked just plain furious; she almost threw chairs aside as she charged at Hiccup, grabbed him by the shirt, and stood him up against the wall.

"_Why_ didn't you _tell_ me?!" she demanded. "Is there some _good reason_ why I couldn't find out about _my own engagement_ before everyone else in the village?" For a moment, Stoick worried that he might have to find another guard to protect Hiccup from his protector.

"I... I... I didn't know!" he stammered. "I just found out about it myself, just like you! You mean your _parents_ didn't tell you?"

She didn't let go of his shirt, but her face softened. Obviously, whoever was to blame for this conspiracy of silence, it wasn't Hiccup. She glanced at her family, half of whom were smiling and half of whom were fearful that she was about to injure her husband-to-be. Then she glanced at the chief, whose face was unreadable. Her anger drained away.

"How do _you_ feel about this?" she asked Hiccup.

"Well, I... I... uhh..."

Tuffnut leaned back on his stool to join the conversation. "Oh, come on, Astrid! Everybody knows he's totally crazy about you!"

"You stay out of this!" she ordered, and kicked his stool out from under him. Tuff went down hard on his backside. Then she turned back to Hiccup, relaxing a bit. "You were saying...?"

"Uhhh... I was saying, if you don't kill me, then I think you might make me very happy."

She looked up at the ceiling for a moment. "I'll think about that. In the meantime..." She bent over and kissed him quickly. "We'll talk more about this, later," she said softly, before rejoining her family.

He'll be in good hands, thought Stoick. _Maybe not perfectly serene, but safe at last._

THE END

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file.